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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001108

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, INR/B; PACOM FOR FPA

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SUBJECT: A CHINESE FLY-ON-THE-WALL VIEW OF THE BURMESE
REGIME

Classified By: CDA Shari Villarosa for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) Summary: A courtesy call on the departing Chinese Ambassador to Burma, who has the greatest access among the diplomatic corps to senior GOB officials, gave us unique insight into the mind set of the regime's top generals. Although his views reveal little common ground between China and the United States on the most effective approach to the Burmese regime, he acknowledged that many of the SPDC's current practices do not guarantee long-term stability, a major concern for China's interests in Burma. The Chinese Ambassador agreed with us that the generals need to pursue, rather than evade, dialogue with the international community and he committed to raising this notion during his remaining farewell calls with senior officials. End Summary.

THE MISUNDERSTOOD GENERALS

2. (SBU) The Charge, joined by P/E Chief and visiting EAP/MLS Director, made a September 21 courtesy call on departing Chinese Ambassador to Burma, Li Jinjun. Li, who noted that the Charge is the third U.S. chief of mission that he has met while in Burma, is in the final weeks of a tour that has lasted over four and a half years. He has traveled widely throughout Burma during his tenure and has gained greater access to top SPDC generals and GOB officials than any other diplomat in Rangoon.

3. (C) Ambassador Li said that few people, "even in China," understand the mentality of the Burmese generals or make any real effort to get to know the country. Most people, he said, expect the SPDC to behave like other military regimes which have seized power. The SPDC, however, is unique in that the top generals did not undertake a coup (in 1988) to gain short-term wealth, but rather to shift away from (former dictator General Ne Win's 26 years of) authoritarian rule to a leadership based on "strategic thinking and interest in political and economic reform."

INTEREST GROUPS

4. (C) The SPDC generals, according to Li, sit at the top of "the country's largest interest group," the armed forces and its many members and dependents. "We can't look only at the senior generals," said Li, "because the decisions of SPDC Chairman Than Shwe effect not only the (12-member junta), but also several million Burmese who have tied their fate to the regime." The generals, he added, want to "find a way out" and transfer power to an elected government, but they must protect their commercial interests, meet the needs of the entire armed forces community, and gain assurances there will be no retribution against those who now rule.

5. (C) The Charge said that while some people benefit from the regime and its rule, it is a small fraction of the 50 million Burmese who have suffered from a steadily declining standard of living. She noted that in order to prepare for an eventual transition, the Burmese people need education, access to health care, and basic infrastructure. The regime has denied such services to the vast majority of the population as a means of perpetuating, not ending, military rule.

17 YEARS AND COUNTING - JUST THE SHORT TERM

6. (C) Li disagreed with outside observers who reject the SPDC's road map to democracy. He related that Than Shwe has told him in private that military rule is only planned for the short term and that the SPDC sees a need to return to civilian rule, "but not so abruptly that chaos forces the military to return quickly to power." Li added his personal perspective that there is no difference between the objectives of Than Shwe and ousted Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt, "they just had different tactics." As an example, Li said that the SPDC did not reject Khin Nyunt's road map, but actually speeded up implementation following his October 2004 "resignation."

7. (C) Ambassador Li asserted that Than Shwe is "very aware of the big picture" and much stronger than Khin Nyunt ever was. "Never look down on, or underestimate the Senior

General," advised Li, "it is impossible to isolate him and pressure him to change." Li added that the West believed, incorrectly, that external pressure had been a factor in convincing the SPDC to relinquish the 2006 ASEAN Chair. "This was actually a victory for Than Shwe," he asserted, "hosting ASEAN would have required that the generals make some changes to accommodate the international community."

HAVE GUNS, WILL TALK

18. (C) In addressing the role of the democratic opposition, Li said that the regime does not allow the participation of Aung San Suu Kyi in the road map process "because her influence with the ethnic groups is significant and would retard the GOB's progress." Furthermore, he said, the SPDC must contend with the ethnics because "they have weapons, and ASSK does not." Li added that he previously had "indirect" contact with ASSK, but denied her 2002 request for a dialogue "because this would have upset the SPDC." Li said he suggested that ASSK put her proposals in a letter to Than Shwe in order to build trust, "but instead she regrettably went on a nationwide tour and encouraged her supporters to provoke the regime."

19. (C) Li said it was just a matter of time ("not if, but when") before the generals resolve relations with the ethnics and turn their attention back to ASSK and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). "The generals will let ASSK participate in the final steps of the road map," said Li, "but for now she represents the minority, and the majority is responsible for finishing the constitution." He added that the responsibility for poor relations between the GOB and the NLD lies not only with Than Shwe, but also with ASSK. "She is a good statesman," said Li, "but she's not God; the NLD needs to be a 'cooperative opposition' and they can't be one under a leader who is out of touch and under the influence of the West."

110. (C) The Charge countered Li's notion that the SPDC places a priority on dealing with the ethnics because they are armed and the NLD is not. "The generals fear the democratic opposition because they fear ideas and those who advocate change," she said, pointing out that the SPDC's greatest surprise since assuming power has been the widespread popularity of ASSK and those who advocate for democracy. She added that it was disingenuous to blame ASSK for poor relations, "since she is in detention and denied any role whatsoever; it is the military that has denied her access to information."

LOOKING FOR SOME LOVE

111. (C) The U.S. media, according to Li, has a fundamental misunderstanding of China's interests in Burma. "It is wrong," he said, "to assume that one-party China wants to perpetuate military rule in Burma." He offered that China places a priority on stability, given its long border with Burma. "Without interfering, we want a peaceful environment and Beijing will maintain the same good relations we have now with a future democratic Burma." The Charge responded that the U.S. and China can agree that Burma needs stability, "but China should be concerned that the regime's tactics and policies are leading to greater poverty and instability." Stability requires a government that is representative of all the people.

112. (C) The Charge continued that the generals claim Burma is "misunderstood," but they refuse to see most diplomats and to engage with the international community. She encouraged Ambassador Li to use his high-level access to press the generals to open up. Li agreed to do so, but added, "To be frank, whenever the regime opens up, the United States and the EU respond with sanctions." Li said after May 2003 Than Shwe held his hand and asked "Why do they sanction me - I have no villas and no foreign bank accounts, and yet they idolize a female (ASSK) who has done nothing for the country?"

113. (C) The Charge replied that the last round of U.S. sanctions, under the Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act, was imposed in response to the May 2003 violent attack on ASSK and her convoy, "hardly an effort by the regime to open a dialogue." She added that it was wrong, and unproductive, for the Burmese regime to target ASSK. "She represents the hopes and desires of the majority of the people," the Charge said, "and the generals should see that it is in their best interests to work with her, and not against her."

114. (C) Bio Note: Ambassador Li rarely socializes with the diplomatic community, perhaps because he has much better access and so does not feel compelled to discuss the latest rumors with other diplomats. He speaks at great length about his European expertise, particularly in Germany where he studied at Heidelberg University in the mid-1970s. Burma was his first SE Asian experience, and he goes to Manila next. While he understands a bit of English, he heavily relies on

an interpreter. He is married and his wife is officially based in Beijing, where she is involved in prison administration. End Bio Note.

COMMENT: THE STATUS QUO

15. (C) Ambassador Li, and presumably the Chinese government, accepts the Burmese military's desire to hold on to power. He also understands, however, that in closing ranks to protect their own positions the generals cannot succeed in the long term. Ambassador Li acknowledged the irony of his recognition that Burma needed to become more democratic. Perhaps he figures that a gradual opening, a la China, would enable the military to maintain control and provide stability. Unfortunately, the Burmese regime is not providing improved standards of living to garner any public support and Ambassador Li did not dispute the fact that economic conditions are deteriorating for most Burmese. So it appears that his confidence that the military leaders will continue to hold on to power rests on their having the weapons, which China, among others, continues to supply. End Comment.
Villarosa